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"HUMANITIES" AS A SUBJECT.

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DESCRIPTORS- *HUMANITIES, *HUMANITIES INSTRUCTION, ART, CLASSICAL LITERATURE, LITERATURE, PHILOSOPHY, HISTORY, CULTURAL BACKGROUND,

SINCE MOST OF THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM IS DEVOTED TO SPECIALIZED DISCIPLINES, HUMANITIES COURSES PROVIDE THE OPPORTUNITY FOR CREATING IN STUDENTS AN AWARENESS OF THE UNITY WHICH EXISTS AMONG PHILOSOPHY, HISTORY, AND THE ARTS. INTENSIVE STUDY AND CLASS DISCUSSION OF INDIVIDUAL WORKS BECOMES IMPOSSIBLE, HOWEVER, WHEN TOO MANY BOOKS ARE CROWDED INTO A HUMANITIES COURSE. AS A CONSEQUENCE, THE WORKS REMAIN REMOTE ARTIFACTS TO BE "APPRECIATED," BUT BEAR NO RELEVANCE TO THE LIVES OF STUDENTS WHO PREFER CURRENT LITERATURE AND OTHER MEDIA. HUMANITIES COURSES CAN BEST BE DEVOTED TO EXAMINING THE PHILOSOPHICAL AND LITERARY ISSUES OF A LIMITED NUMBER OF WORKS, FOR IT IS IN THESE AREAS THAT THE WORKS OF THE PAST ARE RELEVANT TO TODAY'S STUDENTS. THE INTENSIVE STUDY OF STRUCTURE AND STYLE CAN BE LEFT TO SPECIALIZED DEPARTMENTAL COURSES. THROUGH THE ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT OF THE STUDENT IN STUDYING, DISCUSSING, AND ARGUING THE PHILOSOPHICAL AND LITERARY ISSUES, THE WORKS OF THE PAST CAN BECOME ACCESSIBLE TO HIM AND A PART OF THE SHAPING FORCES OF HIS LIFE, RATHER THAN DEAD MONUMENTS TO BE HONORED BUT NEVER TOUCHED. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "JOURNAL OF AESTHETIC EDUCATION," VOL. 1, (AUTUMN 1966), 7-16.) (DL)

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Richard Kuhns

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"Humanities" as a Subject

RICHARD KUHNS

> Babes kepe youre selves
> from ymages. Amen.
>
> Tyndale

Already in late Hellenistic times the Greek classics were unpopular literature, forced to compete with a new common literature which would have obliterated the older works entirely were it not for the demands of formal education and the professions of law, rhetoric, and politics. Think how many times since then the same works have been so endangered; how often resurrected by pedagogical needs. Compulsory education, then as now, preserved a tradition that might have been submerged. Today, as preservation seems accomplished, the gain in security parallels a loss in power; salvation once realized undoes works.

The first challenge to the ancient classics, that flung down by Christian literature and thought, pitted a crude, sentimental, flamboyant, and naive story against sober accounts built on subtleties and penetration. In contrast, our sense of the "classics" embraces both the ancient and the Christian in a huge literary merger. As beneficiaries of such riches, further enlarged by centuries of capital growth, we cannot find the time in our high schools and colleges to draw on our inheritance. We therefore select the few "greatest" works to form the substance of what we term "humanities courses." But even with that careful winnowing, we discern disappointment in the student today, just as there

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was in his predecessor over a millenium past, for he prefers a new common literature of vulgarity and excitement. The new literature is not always in books (just as it was not for the youthful Augustine who tried to break himself of the theater habit), for the development of the cinema has proved more influential and perhaps more creative than the written word in our time.

We too encounter a competition between the classics and the forms of imagination much closer to the student. But the works we urge them to read were in many instances born of a similar dissatisfaction, an urgency about the past that made its forms limitations, and an excitement about the present which forced new forms to come out of the old. We all know that the books in humanities courses are not accepted as vital by more than a few students.

But this is not the main cause of our disquiet. As teachers we know that humanities courses do not satisfy us. Let us take *our* dissatisfaction as the first point at issue. What grounds are there, from *our* point of view, for cutting across departmental boundaries, for throwing literature, history, philosophy together in one course? Humanities courses appear at first to be compilations of incompleteness taught by people competent to deal with but a few of the works they must hold themselves accountable for. Is there any sense in a variety of works inhabiting the same pedagogical space? In my remarks to follow I would like to give what arguments I can to maintain that (1) the books making up a humanities course can intelligently be drawn from different disciplines because, (a) they have historically been influential on one another, and (b) they are now for us mutually interdependent; and that (2) by so taking a group of books they are in fact made into a coherent whole by beliefs and practices of our own, so that what we call "the humanities" constitute a coherent study; and that (3) it can be shown there is historically and ideologically a group of works which do hang together and which have through a long period of time been assembled out of writings cutting across authorship, subject, and genre.

II

Since humanities courses are part of what we term "general education," and since there is dissatisfaction with general education in our schools, we can begin with the practical objections to general education. Rapidly increasing quantities of knowledge, with consequent intensified specialization, have led to narrow concentration in scholarly inquiry. Therefore the young scholar-teacher (and it is often the new instructor who gets saddled with general education courses) finds a conflict be-

tween his professional scholarship and the demands of his daily teaching. Demands for broad treatment of a variety of works conflict with his need to do sharply focused penetrating scholarship. Teaching a humanities course does not provide preparation for scholarship, and it is far more prudent professionally to do the teaching which helps one write journal articles. We therefore encounter the curious situation in many colleges that a faculty approves of general education but does not want individually to participate in teaching it.

No amount of persuasion will change the attitude just outlined, for the standards of individual disciplines are rightly rigorous and in most cases defensible. But can we not, on good pedagogical grounds, offer reasons for including the humanities courses in a curriculum, and thereby show what the advantages might be in teaching them? To do this, basic beliefs about human capacities and intellectual disciplines must be revealed.

Perhaps the most difficult problem facing the teacher in a humanities course is the relationship between ideas and the literary forms in which they are presented. We have, in a vague way, separated artists and thinkers, assigning sensibility to the first and deliberative thought to the second. Moving as he does from literature to history to philosophy and back again, the teacher of a humanities sequence puzzles over the mode of analysis appropriate to each text. At the same time he recognizes from the writing of the past that at least in the foundation of our written consciousness works were produced without a belief that the dichotomy we respect mattered. While there is a developing self-consciousness about genre differences and the mode of exposition appropriate to each subject, underlying the distinctions is a firm belief that the important problems come out of the sphere of the political. In short, the ancient focus is *humanistic* because the target is the human, his peculiarities and his essential nature. I maintain that at least in the beginning of the tradition to which humanities courses are dedicated, the troublesome distinction between artistic sensibility and rigorous cognitive inquiry did not exist.

The evidence for this is in the past writings themselves, in their obvious interrelations: works of different orders address themselves to one another. We need only think of the plays of the tragedians, the writings of the historians and philosophers to know that philosophy contended with drama, drama with history, history with philosophy. Historically there is at least one period in which statements of various literary orders were mutually influential. Communication did not break down because the aesthetic was considered incompatible with the cognitive; but rather reasoning prospered in the sensibility it encouraged,

and the extent of sensibility was enlarged by the application of careful thought to literary excellence.

To my mind the most significant relationship is that of philosophy and literature, for philosophy provides modes of inquiry most helpful to understanding drama, epic, poetry, and the novel, while these in turn provide serious material for philosophic analysis and speculation. This enhancing interdependence is not relevant to every period in our past, but it does come about now and then, and when it does happen we are apt to recover works most fit for a humanities course.

Not only have works which we find proper to humanities courses been mutually influential in the past; they are so in the present, and have been joined by many more recent works in a joint stock company of shares representing a corporate reality. In saying this I mean to defend the unpopular position that truth is a relevant concept to all the works we consider in a humanities course. Literature, like philosophy and history, has cognitive possibilities: we can learn from it. There are a series of "big" literary works to be encountered in our usual selection: *The Oresteia, The Divine Comedy, Paradise Lost,* and the like. They relate to one another not so much in style, poetic techniques, or literary methods as in what they talk about and reveal, namely their reality. They address themselves to what is and to how what there is can be imaginatively construed. While they do not work out a didactic position, they are concerned with a reality to be known in and through themselves. I repeat, this is true no matter what the technical disposition of their literary structure.

Let me take an obvious example, Shakespeare's *King Lear.* A humanities course cannot hope to subject *King Lear* to a full, satisfactory analysis of the sort it would receive in a seminar devoted to Shakespeare's tragedies. How can we justify its inclusion in a humanities course? Only by discovering what can be said meaningfully and instructively in a short time about a complex play on the part of an instructor whose specialty may be in another type of literature or another subject altogether. It seems to me that the inclusion of *King Lear* can be defended only if certain aspects of the play are selected for analysis and discussion. Those must be, because of time and because of the purposes of the course, the ideas of the play; in short, what is it *about,* not what means it relies on in its literary and aesthetic structure. Of course, what it is about cannot be separated from the other dimensions, and one ought to talk about Shakespeare's language, his structural ingenuity. But most relevant in this kind of course is what *Lear* is about, that is, its concern with generations (parents and children), love, politics, philosophy, wisdom, and moral values in human action. I

know this, so generally stated, sounds like the pony students use to substitute for the books, but truth to tell, the pony often says more about a work's genuine concerns than hours of analysis devoted to linguisitic subtleties. I think the student in a humanities course should come away with the realization that literature can and does deal with, present, analyze ideas, but in a special way: ideas as the substance of art.

This consequence requires an ability to read, and we all know that the innermost disability of our students trained in the United States today is an inability to read. It underlies the inability to write and the inability to argue.

III

The books in a humanities course are chosen because they participate in a reality which we hope to make available to our students. To make clear the position I am asserting, a position that maintains there have been in the past and there continue to be in the present a number of works which, coming from various disciplines and various traditions yet mutually influence one another and contribute to, as well as participate in a humanistic reality, I must say something about the idea of *heritage.*

By heritage I mean the accumulation of human works of the past towards which a special attitude and mode of comportment is appropriate. For every society there are emotional and intellectual postures expressing veneration or special esteem directed towards a readily identifiable class of objects. These works, because of their special properties, have achieved an *identity,* i.e., they have established themselves as if they were persons. They share the qualities of personhood, and like persons are accorded respect; they are, in those terms appropriate to the sort of thing they are, preserved, protected, displayed, interpreted, mastered — accorded all the cultural protection derived from the activity of criticism, connoisseurship, restoration, classification, and display. The works in a humanities course, like the paintings in a museum, are kept in special precincts for their instructive powers and their traditional virtues.

The attitudes we have towards heritage put us in a peculiar relationship to the humanities. It appears to me reasonable to say that we are at the present time in a "post-humanities" world. The truly great books — perhaps the truly great works of art in general — are, we feel, complete. "The Five Foot Shelf" is indeed just that; there need not be a larger bookcase built because the immediate future is unlikely to add anything to the accumulation of heritage. But why should this be the case?

There are, I think, two reasons, one socio-cultural, one artistic. The

socio-cultural reason is this: we have bred a new attitude towards the humanities, an attitude of complacency in the sense of what constitutes the "well-educated man." To be conversant with a set of great books is to be well-educated. Executive cadres trained for our great industries, workers on assembly lines, businessmen who want to become "humanized" are given training in the humanities. Right now as I write this, corps of executives are attending summer schools in which they read and discuss sets of books that are truly great, far-reaching, profound. This kind of training is more than an exposure; it raises in the student beliefs about greatness, about goodness, about the quality of his contemporary cultural environment. Indeed, it is hard for us to imagine a great literary work being produced now, for we are in the midst of experimentations, shadowy configurations deriving from the past but all lacking penetration, scale, wisdom, artistic excellence.

Artistically we have raised expectations about what *art* properly speaking is; and therefore we impose conventions upon creativity which only radical innovation and rebellion can overcome. But it is a curious fact that we have a different, more tolerant, and perhaps less serious attitude towards those imaginative works which lie closer to pastime and entertainment, further from the academy. The cinema is, to my mind, an art form with great and as yet unrealized possibilities. Unlike the traditional humanities, where greatness, monumental scale, fineness of artistic sensibility, and deep insight are carefully charted and defined, the cinema has no such structure and no such demands imposed upon it. There, because we are unsure, tentative, and because we need not aim at *art*, we are free to experiment without feeling, too, that we are overthrowing a tradition of two thousand years.

The contrast I draw between those achievements marked by heritage and identity and those which enjoy a popular recognition allows me to emphasize a point I take seriously, although it may sound frivolous, the assertion that we may be in a post-humanities world. If this is so we will tend more and more to protect, admire, even to venerate our great books and to endow them with the property of texts which comprise a finite, self-referring reality. This can give power and point to our humanities courses, though it forces apart the present creative achievements from the past in an unhealthy way. This growing separation has been discussed in another essay which is a companion to this one.[1] Here I want to consider the concept of a reality to which various kinds of works contribute.

[1] "The Future of the Humanities," Conference on Prospective Changes in Society by 1980, Denver, Colorado.

IV

While it is easy to say the humanities constitute a reality, it is far more difficult to delineate the structure of that reality and to map it with students. Each book in a humanities course has its own integrity, each book however is understood in relationship to the other books in the course. The student's way into the reality which they constitute is through the text; the text is the immediate *thing*, the presence, the empirical datum upon which his knowledge of the humanities world will be built.

The failure of most humanities courses is in the teacher's disbelief in, or inability to take seriously, the sheer weight of evidence which the text provides. Scientific in its demands, rigorous in its methods, the literary text provides a created literary world in which the student can find answers to questions, can pose and test hypotheses, discover what is impossible as well as what makes claims of a high degree of probability. It is in this sense a world to be explored, known, charted, evaluated; the confrontation of a student and a text ought to be challenging. Indeed, the humanities course can be a scientific and objective exercise, satisfying the demands of the rigorous mind. I say this as an answer to those, usually from the social sciences, though less frequently from the sciences, who say that humanities courses are intellectual tourism or dilettantism or simple development of sensibility, implying that the mind is left out of account.

The difficulty we find in establishing the reality of a text is a function of two attitudes, our historicism and our scientism. Historicism leads us to think of a text as culturally time-conditioned, an expression of an age different from our own and hence not involved in truth, but rather to be seen as the fantasy and belief of a people different from us. The humanities course under this structuring is very apt to be a visit with the quaint ways of our forebears, a look at foreign ideologies. Each book, dressed in the costume of its age, becomes a masquerade but not something in which a student can find a contemporary relevance. If it is objected that they are all *very real* to the scholar, we are likely to defend the reality by a stance of scientific objectivity. Careful analysis of the text in terms of language and structure which can be presented with a high degree of inferential evidence impresses the student but leaves him without the conviction that there is a real presence. In both approaches, values and judgments that can be disputed are avoided because they are either time-bound or unscientific. Questions of truth and, more dishearteningly, questions of aesthetic excellence are left out for the comforting certainties of textual analysis.

Textual exegesis with attention to the details of language and structure are the foundations on which aesthetic, moral, and cognitive judgments rest. There is great need to make this clear to the humanities student during his training. As a member of a department within the university, the humanities teacher has, to be sure, the training to carry out careful textual analyses. But that is not the most valuable task for the humanities course which intentionally cuts across departmental limitations and in so doing opens up new realms for the student. Too great an emphasis on the purely historical and on the technical textual questions will place the texts in a remote, unreal realm: they are seen as monuments, landmarks, tourist attractions, or as scholarly quarries. They are not seen in relationship to the larger issues of truth and artistic excellence for which they have been and still can be honored.

The reality of the texts, something the student can grapple with and find meaningful as part of his life, is to be found in the literary and philosophical issues that appear again and again in the course of the year's discussion. As the inquiry proceeds, it becomes evident that the works read relate to one another in their content, structure, and styles. No book itself is as significant as that book compared with and read with reference to another book. Our own cultural history is one of assumed recognitions that the past is relevant to the present. Therefore the set of books which a humanities course can accommodate is very large indeed. But now I must recall the remarks made above to the effect that we may be living in an age when great works are not being produced, and the tradition of continued relevance is abrogated. If that is true, we can set a limit to the books which merit inclusion in a humanities course. I cannot here argue the limit I would set, but I think each one of us has a sense of where greatness ends. This in itself is an odd and disturbing thought.

Of course, this does not mean there cannot be new ventures in creative efforts that will prove successful, but I remind you of the comment above that if this comes about, it will most likely be in media that we now disdain and exclude from our humanities courses. I can imagine a humanities course of the future which well might include cinema. Were that to come about, we would add one more kind of work to the several kinds now comprising the courses. As long as we keep open the possibility of additions, the humanities courses retain their experimental and liberal character. But in saying this, I am defending a position that the proponents of strict adherence to departmental provinces object to. Let me be explicit then in what I am asserting: there is a place in the college curriculum (I am in doubt

about the high school curriculum) for a set of books drawn from inquiries properly referred to as philosophy, history, epic, drama, poetry, novel (literature in the broadest sense), and perhaps too from the sciences, which fit together to make a coherent whole of intellectual awareness and artistic order. Though the very same works may be encountered in courses in proper departments, they benefit one another in a special way by being considered together in a course to which we have given the name "humanities." To be sure, this kind of course presents hardships to teachers reared and rewarded in special departmental scholarship, and perhaps does not allow the student to develop the depth, precision, and methodological sophistication he can and must develop in departmental courses; yet they are justified by their being the way into the humanistic concern which is everybody's proper concern no matter what his special field of inquiry.

Competence in teaching the humanities is therefore not the competence which derives solely from training in a well-defined scholarly discipline, although it might be said that such training is the necessary condition for teaching a humanities course. A physicist can teach in a humanities program as well as a literary critic; the criterion is not one of profession, but of developed awareness and self-reflection. I am in no way embarrassed at the disparity between the scientist's supposed capability in the humanities and the humanist's weakness in science. This is testimony to the relevance of the subject in the thought we devote to ourselves as human beings.

The relevance of the works in a humanities course is a function of their human concern, a concern for human passivities and activities. Men must endure and men must act; the undergoings of birth, life, death, the actions that require character and skill, these are observed again and again in the works from which no discipline is excluded. A crude definition of the subject of a humanities course might be: the nature of human experience as an object of awareness, and the nature of human acts as both content of awareness and events observed.

So considered, any one author will most likely have but a few works or a single work to contribute; a departmental subject will be in some cases richly, in others poorly, represented. But the purpose of the humanities course is not to introduce the student to the discipline of history, English literature, philosophy, foreign literature, the classics, for these are more adequately dealt with on their home ground. The student will necessarily miss the technically developed critical analyses which he will get in good measure in the more leisurely professional courses. Yet I cannot argue the humanities away until our students (by which I mean the American high school and college students) have

a greater familiarity with and easy access to the books which for most of them remain monumentally inaccessible.

Mysterious and opaque as they may at first appear, the books must be taken up in the liberal atmosphere of a class where the hard, subtle, penetrating thought of outstanding minds is honestly discussed and argued. But to what end? I can only state my belief as the conclusion of these remarks. Once we have set aside the obvious benefit of simply reading important and fruitful books, we can return to the idea of a set of mutually influential statements that employ a variety of means (philosophical argument, dramatic representation, lyric utterance, story, recollection, reflection) to present the nature of human experience and creative originality. The aesthetic as a mode of realizing ideas, cognitive inquiry as having a variety of means at its disposal for realizing its powers, become a reality in a curriculum otherwise devoted almost entirely to the belief that methods are unitary and conclusions the property of special disciplines. Perhaps the strongest indictment of this point of view is to be found in our need to defend the humanities as a subject.

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